

Teacher Version

Briefing Memo X, The Early Cold War (1946-1961)

The year 1946 was a difficult one for Americans. Nothing was working out quite as planned. True, the United Nations promised to be stronger and more viable than the old League of Nations and progress on peacetime issues was being made [*International Convention on Whaling, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Conventions on Protection of Civilians in War and on the Treatment of POWs*], but one of America's wartime allies was well on its way to becoming an enemy. The Soviet Union's disregard for treaty commitments and brutal domination of its Eastern European satellites signaled new and difficult problems for the post-war era. Americans—both inside and outside the government—struggled to come to terms with the new reality. [*George Kennan's Long Telegram, Churchill's Iron Curtain speech*]

The aggression of the Soviet Union required a new diplomatic and military response from the United States. That response was known as containment, a policy of halting the advance of the Soviets in crucial areas by providing economic aid and strengthening nations around the perimeter of the USSR. [*Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan*] Americans understood the Communist threat as so severe, that U.S. policy changed from its traditional stance of non-entanglement to one of partnerships to ensure its security. [*Rio Treaty, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the Baghdad Pact*]

Uneasiness and fear about Europe and the Soviet Union in part stemmed from events on the other side of the world in China. The end of World War II marked the start of full-blown civil war between the forces of Chiang Kai-shek and his communist opponent, Mao Zedong. In 1949 Chiang relocated his Chinese Nationalist government to an island off the coast of China. Mao

established a new, Communist government on the mainland. China had two radically different governments.

Americans were stunned. How could the United States have “lost” China after spending more than \$2 billion? [*Arthur Vandenberg's Observations on China*] Some prominent Americans thought they had an answer. The “China Hands” of the Foreign Service, who had observed Mao and his movement first hand and who had such a negative opinions about Chiang, might have undermined U.S. policy in China. Their colleagues in the Department of State had worked closely with the Soviets during wartime and they were still guiding U.S. policy around the world. Would they, too, undermine American interests? Senator Joseph McCarthy launched his first attack directly at the diplomats of the Department of State. [*Enemies from Within, A Nest of Communists*] McCarthyism would set Americans against each other and would have a chilling effect on diplomacy worldwide.

In the wake of the Communist take-over, the Truman Administration struggled to define U.S. foreign policy in Asia. [*Secretary Acheson on U.S. Far Eastern Policy, Excerpts from NSC-68*] They concluded that any loss for the United States was a gain for the Soviet Union—every conflict had to be interpreted through the lens of the conflict with the Soviet Union. The outbreak of hostilities on the Korean peninsula in June 1950 tested that theory and brought the United States dangerously close to war with Communist China. Three years of inconclusive fighting ended with a truce, not a peace treaty, and the United States quickly signed a defensive treaty with South Korea to deter future aggression and maintain the status

quo. [*Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of Korea*]

Americans were tired of the endless tension of the “cold” war with the Soviet Union and elected President Eisenhower in 1952 to chart a more vigorous course. Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles promised to bring a new (and less expensive) approach to the conflict [*A New Policy of Boldness, Atoms for Peace*], relying on America's nuclear weapons. But the “massive retaliation” nuclear option was useless to stop the Soviet Union from more quietly undermining American interests in smaller, more incremental ways.

Despite the Good Neighbor policy and the idealism of postwar aspirations [*Charter of the Organization of American States*], some Americans were growing tired of the slow progress in Latin America. [*On a Certain Impatience with Latin America*] When the new Eisenhower Administration suspected Soviet designs on Guatemala [*Guatemala: a Serious Threat to the Western Hemisphere*], they authorized a new tactic: covert operations. [*Story of a Covert Operation*] The deeply flawed operation seemed to be a success and it provided a dangerous precedent for future operation in other global hotspots—from Asia to the Caribbean—and fostered a willingness to aid other remote, but endangered, nations. [*US Involvement in Vietnam begins Quietly*]

That impulse to weigh in on issues remote from traditional American interests could also be observed in the Middle East. In 1948, the United States learned that a provisional government was about to form the new state of Israel. [*Provisional Government of Israel to the*

United States] Despite the objection of the Department of State, which was concerned about the reaction of the surrounding Arab nations, President Truman saw the matter as a moral one and recognized the new state within minutes. [*The United States Recognizes Israel*] Moral or political, the conflict would repeatedly flare into open hostility, creating new uncertainties for the United States. In 1957, President Eisenhower would later articulate the first of several American statements on Middle East policy. [*The Eisenhower Doctrine*]

By the late 1950s, Americans felt less secure and more threatened than ever before. Atomic weapons provided no peace—only an armed standoff—once the Soviets had them, too. There seemed to be no basis for a common understanding. [*A Soviet View of World Events*] Would an armed stalemate last forever and would a constant emphasis on expensive security make us even less secure? As he prepared to leave office, President Eisenhower—the great general of World War II—warned Americans about the consequences: “As we peer into society’s future, we—

you and I, and our government—must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage. We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent phantom of tomorrow.” [*Dangers of the Military Industrial Complex*] ■